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December 2005

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Kanuti

## *National Wildlife Refuge*

### News from Kanuti Refuge



#### **Merry Maxwell Leaves Kanuti Refuge Staff**

In November, Assistant Refuge Manager, Merry Maxwell, was selected as the new Refuge Manager of Pahrangat (Pa-ran-a-gat) Refuge, just north of Las Vegas, Nevada. This new position will allow Merry to continue developing her leadership skills, while she tackles issues such as prescribed burning, invasive species, extremely high public use, a scarcity of water, and an abundance of off-road vehicles. Merry has been with the Fairbanks Refuges since 1997, when she started as a biological technician for Yukon Flats Refuge. Merry took over as the Assistant Refuge Manager for Kanuti in 2001, under previous Refuge Manager, Bob Schulz. You can continue to contact Merry by email at [merry\\_maxwell@fws.gov](mailto:merry_maxwell@fws.gov).

#### **Kanuti Refuge Receives Environmental Awards**

Kanuti Refuge received four awards in 2005 because of the staff's efforts to practice good environmental stewardship. These efforts included: using recycled products in the Fairbanks office, an erosion preventing stair/trail system at Kanuti Lake, solar power systems at the Marion Creek and Kanuti Lake administrative cabins, replacing single-walled fuel tanks and older boat motors, developing mobile oil spill response kits, and presenting environmental outreach focused on minimizing land-use footprints. The refuge was recognized with Environmental Achievement and Leadership awards and the Refuge of the Year award. In November, Assistant Refuge Manager, Merry Maxwell, accepted a Department of Interior Environmental Achievement Award in Washington DC.



#### **Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) Update**

The Kanuti Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) is still in the process of being developed. The first draft of the document is currently being compiled by Service planners in the Anchorage Regional Office. The Washington Office has already made comments. The Regional Office and Kanuti staff are working on getting the document ready to be released to the public. The document will then be made available for the public. There will be another chance to voice your comments during a second round of meetings and visits in interested communities. We will keep you posted as to when and where these will happen.

AMERICA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES...  
*where wildlife comes first!*





## Ask for a Wolf Survey, Get a Wolf Survey

In March 2005, an aerial wolf survey was conducted on a portion of the refuge and surrounding lands. This was in response to a request by the Western Interior Regional Advisory Council. Pilot Harley McMahan was contracted for the survey due to his expertise in tracking wolves. Forty-eight wolves in thirteen packs were observed in the survey area, for a density of about 17 wolves/1,000 mi<sup>2</sup>. This is similar to a count of 14 wolves/1,000 mi<sup>2</sup> during a similar survey in 2001. Results for both surveys are considered a minimum count.

## New Species of Damselfly Discovered on Refuge

A new insect species for Alaska, a prairie bluet damselfly (*Coenagrion angulatum*), was discovered on Kanuti Refuge. The sighting represents a northern shift in this species known range. The specimen was collected by refuge staff in 2004, during an insect inventory near the Kanuti Lake administrative cabin. Dragonfly specialist John Hudson of Juneau identified the damselfly and his identification was confirmed by Dennis Paulson, of the Slater Museum of Natural History at the University of Puget Sound.



Photo by: Tom D. Schultz



## New Addition to Refuge Bird List

This summer near Kanuti Lake, an Upland Sandpiper was spotted during the refuge's Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). Although this is not a rare bird species for Interior Alaska, this sighting represents the first time refuge biologists have seen this bird on Kanuti Refuge. The Upland Sandpiper is fairly common throughout the Brooks Range, but is uncommon or rare elsewhere. Each summer refuge biologists conduct a BBS near Kanuti Canyon and Kanuti Lake. The two routes feature quite different habitats, with the long-running Kanuti Canyon route representing fairly unique habitat for the refuge, and the newly established Kanuti Lake route representing typical boreal forest habitat along rivers.

## Long-term Inventory and Monitoring Program

The Kanuti Refuge Biological Review recommended the refuge develop and implement a Long-term Ecological Inventory and Monitoring Program. The purposes of this program are to: (1) examine the number and distribution of plants, land and aquatic invertebrates, fish, and wildlife resources; and (2) assess the environmental factors that may influence them. This program will result in a better understanding of species abundances, distributions, habitat requirements, and fundamental ecological relationships. From this information, the refuge will gain baseline data to assess impacts of potential site-specific development projects within the refuge or in similar habitats outside the refuge. Refuge biologists began inventorying portions of the refuge in the summer of 2004. Three plots were visited in the summer of 2005. At the first 2005 plot, information on birds, habitat, small mammals, and tree age was collected. The area had burned the previous summer, so fire severity data were also collected. Insects were collected at the plot's base camp. Additional vegetation data were collected this past summer. One plot, near Nolitna Creek, burned just before the 2005 fieldwork. This site will be resurveyed for birds in 2006.





## Humpback Whitefish Tagging

In early September, Fisheries Biologist Randy Brown (Fairbanks Fisheries Office) tagged an additional 21 humpback whitefish on their spawning grounds in the upper Kanuti River. These transmitters will provide information on fish location during spawning, overwintering, and feeding seasons for the next two years. This was part of a larger project that began in May 2004 (see February 2005 newsletter), where a number of humpback whitefish, broad whitefish, and least cisco were radio-tagged in the Kanuti River wetlands, upstream from the mouth of the Kanuti Kilolitna River.

## It's Moose Survey Time of Year

In early November, Kanuti Refuge received the snow cover that refuge staff needed to conduct a reliable moose survey. The survey was done in cooperation with ADF&G biologist, Glenn Stout, from Galena. Survey crews were successfully able to survey all 102 selected plots this year. The results are currently being analyzed, but our initial impression is that moose numbers are stable. We will alert you when a report becomes available.



## Trumpeter Swan Survey

Refuge staff participated in the statewide Trumpeter Swan aerial survey, held every five years in interior Alaska, from August 30 to September 1. Refuge staff observed 233 adults and 72 young, up from 112 and 17, respectively, in 2000. The increase in adults is due in part to more flocked birds in 2005 (100 vs. 16 in 2000); more importantly, numbers of pairs are up by almost 50% (45 in 2000, 64 in 2005). Territorial pairs should represent a more stable part of the population when comparing between years. Additionally, the number of broods tripled from 2000 to 2005 (21 vs. 7), and average brood size was up one cygnet from 2000 (3.4 versus 2.4). Fifteen years ago, Kanuti Refuge conducted a study and found that 65% of the swans found on the refuge at that time were Trumpeter Swans.



## The Hunt is on for Invasive Plant Species

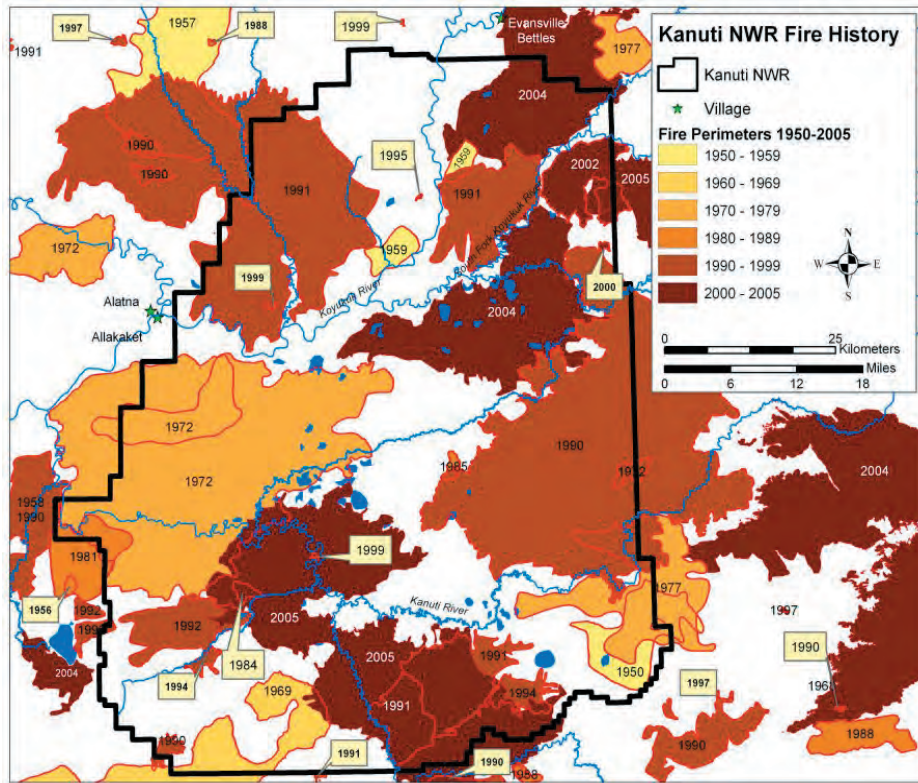
This summer, botanists with the Alaska Natural Heritage Program floated the South Fork Koyukuk River in early July to look for invasive (nonnative) plant species on Kanuti Refuge within the 2004 Clawanmenka Fire perimeter. This was part of a larger effort within Alaska under the regional Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation initiative. Other areas that were surveyed included shoreline margins, cabins along the South Fork, and Native allotment margins within the burn (e.g., near Minnkokut, Clawanmenka, (Little) Kaldolyeit, and Fish Creek lakes). Areas with human activity are thought to be at higher risk of invasive plants. All areas surveyed on the refuge were free of nonnative plants. Although a few nonnative plants were found around the airstrip and VOR Lake in Bettles. These plants could serve as seed sources to spread these plants elsewhere. If you have any questions regarding these plants, please contact the refuge office. Refuge staff will continue to monitor recently burned areas for invasive species. If invasive species are found, attempts to destroy them will help limit their spread.



## 2005 Fire Season is Third Largest on Record

Alaska had another record-breaking fire season in 2005 with over 4.6 million acres burned. After 2004's unprecedented 6.6 million acres burned, few people expected to see another big season so soon. Looking at records back to the 1950's, there are no consecutive years with over 2 million acres burned, until the 2004/2005 seasons. When the right combination of dry weather and lightning strikes returned again this spring, it didn't take long for some fires from last season to resurface and begin burning again and for new fires to start. This year and last kept the fire community busy in Alaska. Two fires impacted Kanuti Refuge this season, the Old Dummy and North Bonanza fires.

The Old Dummy fire started on June 16, near the confluence of the Kanuti and Kilolitna Rivers. Firefighters used a combination of smokejumpers, burnouts (intentionally burned areas), and suppression techniques to direct this fire away from the Kanuti Lake administrative cabin, the "1606" repeater site, and Native allotments. No structures are believed to have been lost and no injuries were reported. The fire was officially declared out on September 30 after 231,822 acres burned, although refuge staff saw a small smoke within the fire perimeter during the moose survey in November.



*Map of Kanuti Refuge Fire History 1950-2005*

The North Bonanza fire, which also started on June 16, started east of the refuge boundary; however, by the end of June, over 2,700 acres had burned in the northeast corner of the refuge. This fire was responsible for putting up quite a bit of smoke throughout the summer and stopped traffic on the Dalton Highway a couple of times. This fire was not staffed and was officially declared out at the end of September, after 190,942 acres burned (about 5,000 acres were on refuge lands).

Many benefits come from a wildfire, especially in the boreal forest of Alaska. Fires release nutrients back into the soil that were once trapped in the woody material of plants. Fire stimulates growth in a variety of plant species, creates hiding spots for small mammals, which are prey for species like marten, and releases seeds of fire-dependent species.



## Self-guided Walking Trail in Bettles/Evansville

Refuge staff have been working with the communities of Bettles and Evansville to develop a self-guided trail that will weave around town towards VOR Lake. The trail will include walkways, informational kiosks, a bird viewing blind, and benches. Members of both the communities, as well as visitors, will be able to use this trail anytime of the year. A brochure with information on the plants and bird species found in the area is being planned. The National Park Service visitor center will have refuge binoculars and bird and plant identifiers available for loan, free of cost, to those who would like more information about the area.





## Coldfoot is Home to the Top of the World

The Arctic Interagency Visitor Center in Coldfoot, Alaska, 60 miles north of the Arctic Circle, is home to a globe of the *Top of the World*. The globe was installed this summer. Upon walking into the center, visitors will now see a scaled-down version of the top of the world, including mountainous relief. The crown jewel of the circumpolar room, the globe has been positioned to be the first object your eye catches when you walk into the center. The contrast between the boreal forest and the North Slope is clearly evident. With the *Top of the World* as the focal point, everyone is drawn to the display that makes it fun to learn about the Arctic. Kanuti Refuge contributes one staff position to the visitor center during the summer months.



## Alaska Refuges Friends Group - Get Involved!!

Alaska's National Wildlife Refuges have formed an Alaska Refuges Friends Group. A Friends Group is a formal organization (usually non-profit), composed of citizens who share a passion for wildlife and are dedicated to promoting their local refuge. The group is responsible for educating the local community about the mission of the refuge and conservation issues, donating time to complete projects, advocating for the refuge to lawmakers, and supporting specific projects by raising funds. Refuge employees do not direct a Friends Group. Instead, they attend meetings and keep both Friends and refuge staff knowledgeable of each other's activities. This particular Friends Group is somewhat different from others formed across the United States because it will represent 16 Alaskan National Wildlife Refuges. Board members and general members will be scattered across the entire state and maybe even across the Nation and abroad.

A group of interested citizens met face-to-face at Kenai Refuge in early November to begin the formal process of becoming a Friends Group. They developed a mission statement and logo (see right), formed a board of directors, brainstormed projects to become involved with, and discussed the need for regional representation throughout the state. Eight regions were considered: 1) Northern (Arctic, Yukon Flats, and Kanuti); 2) Central (Nowitna, Koyukuk, and Innoko); 3) North Western (Selawik); 4) Western (Yukon Delta and Togiak); 5) Aleutian Islands (Alaska Maritime); 6) Peninsula (Becharof, AK Peninsula, and Izembek); 7) Southern (Kodiak and Kenai); and 8) Eastern (Tetlin). There are Friends representatives in some of these regions already, but not all of them. These representatives will help to form sub-groups in each region to determine issues/needs and gain local support.



The mission statement for this group is: "Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to: promoting the conservation of the natural resources of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuges; fostering understanding, and appreciation of these refuges; and engaging in activities that will assist the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to meet its mandates.

The following members volunteered to be the Friends first executive board:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| o President – David Raskin (Homer)     | o Vice President – Carla Stanley (Homer) |
| o Secretary – Penny Bauder (Anchorage) | o Treasure – Ginny Harris (Anchorage)    |

If you would like to get involved with the Alaskan Refuge Friends Group or would like more information about this group, you can email them at [akrefugefriends@gmail.com](mailto:akrefugefriends@gmail.com) or write them at Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges 2440 E. Tudor Road PMB 283 Anchorage, AK 99507-1185.



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Kanuti has a toll free number. Anytime you need to talk with someone from the Kanuti staff, please call 1-877-220-1853.

As always, if you have questions about something you saw in this newsletter please call the Fairbanks office and ask for Jody.

**1-877-220-1853**



*"It is our task in our time and in our generation to hand down undiminished to those who come after us, as was handed down to us by those who went before, the natural wealth and beauty which is ours."*

*--President John F. Kennedy*